

The Florida Senate
BILL ANALYSIS AND FISCAL IMPACT STATEMENT

(This document is based on the provisions contained in the legislation as of the latest date listed below.)

Prepared By: The Professional Staff of the Committee on Environment and Natural Resources

BILL: SB 1266

INTRODUCER: Senator Rodriguez

SUBJECT: Venomous Reptiles

DATE: March 13, 2023

REVISED: _____

	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR	REFERENCE	ACTION
1.	Carroll	Rogers	EN	Favorable
2.	_____	_____	CJ	_____
3.	_____	_____	RC	_____

I. Summary:

SB 1266 revises the penalties for the release or escape of certain reptiles. The bill provides, by revision or addition, the following violations:

- A violation of the rules or orders of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) that require housing of wildlife in a safe manner when the violation results in an escape of wildlife other than any venomous reptiles is a Level Two violation. If this results in the escape of any venomous reptiles that would be a Level Three violation;
- Knowingly releasing a nonnative reptile of concern or allowing a nonnative reptile of concern to escape through gross negligence is a Level Three violation;
- Knowingly releasing any venomous reptile or allowing any venomous reptile to escape through gross negligence a Level Four Violation;
- Knowingly purchasing, selling, attempting to sell, offering to sell, conspiring to sell, bartering, exchanging, trading, or importing for sale or use, any venomous reptile species without having first obtained a special permit or license from FWC is a Level Four violation.

II. Present Situation:

Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) is responsible for regulating, managing, protecting, and conserving the state’s fish and wildlife resources.¹ FWC is governed by a board of seven members who are appointed by the Governor and confirmed by the Florida Senate.² Under Article IV, Section 9 of the Florida Constitution, FWC has the authority to exercise the regulatory and executive powers of the state with respect to wild animal life, fresh water aquatic life, and marine life.

¹ FLA. CONST. art. IV, s. 9.

² *Id.*; see also s. 379.102(1), F.S.

Nonnative Reptiles in Florida

Many nonnative species in Florida do not cause problems in the state, however some can become invasive.³ Invasive species are nonnative species that cause harm to the economy, environment, or human health.⁴ In many cases, invasive species may threaten native species, biodiversity, ecosystem services, recreation, water resources, agricultural and forest production, cultural resources, economies and property values, public safety, and infrastructure.⁵

Nonnative reptiles in Florida include many species of crocodylians, turtles, snakes, geckos, iguanas and relatives, monitors, skinks and girdled lizards, and whiptails and wall lizards.⁶ Scientists estimated in 2015 that there were at least 63 established species of nonnative reptiles and amphibians in Florida, including 48 species of lizards, 4 frogs, 5 turtles, 5 snakes, and 1 crocodylian.⁷

Early invasive reptiles in Florida included small-bodied lizards and frogs that were early-maturing insectivores and were strongly associated with people and disturbed habitats.⁸ These were mostly introduced through cargo and included the Cuban tree frog, brown anole, northern curly-tailed lizard, and Mediterranean gecko. Newer invasive reptiles tend to be large-bodied lizards and snakes. They are relatively early-maturing prolific breeders, are predators of vertebrate prey, and they thrive in a wide range of habitats. These newer invasive reptiles were mostly introduced through the pet trade and include the Burmese python, black spiny-tailed iguana, Argentine black and white tegu, and Nile monitor.⁹

Native Venomous Reptiles in Florida

There are six venomous reptiles – all snakes – native to Florida.¹⁰ These snakes are the pygmy rattlesnake, eastern diamondback rattlesnake, timber (or canebrake) rattlesnake, cottonmouth, copperhead, and eastern coral snake. Distributions of these snakes in Florida are as follows:

- Cottonmouths and eastern diamondback rattlesnakes are found throughout the state;
- Pygmy rattlesnakes are distributed throughout the state except for the Florida Keys;
- Eastern coral snakes are found throughout the state except for the southern Keys; and
- Timber rattlesnakes and copperheads are only found in parts of the Panhandle.¹¹

³ FWC, *Florida's Nonnative Fish and Wildlife*, <https://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/nonnatives/> (last visited Mar. 9, 2023).

⁴ U.S. Forest Service, *Invasive Species*, <https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/invasive-species> (last visited Mar. 9, 2023).

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ FWC, *Nonnative Reptiles*, <https://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/nonnatives/reptiles/> (last visited Mar. 9, 2023).

⁷ Frank Mazzotti and Rebecca Harvey, The University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS), *The Invasion of Exotic Reptiles and Amphibians in Florida*, <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/UW365> (last visited Mar. 9, 2023).

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, *Dealing with Snakes*, https://ufwildlife.ifas.ufl.edu/venomous_snake_identification.shtml (last visited Mar. 11, 2023).

¹¹ *Id.*

Florida Regulations of Captive Reptiles

Under Florida statute, no person may capture, keep, possess, or exhibit any poisonous or venomous reptile or reptile of concern without first having obtained a special permit or license from FWC.¹² It is unlawful for any person, whether licensed or not, to capture, keep, possess, or exhibit any venomous reptile or reptile of concern in any manner not approved as safe, secure, and proper. FWC may inspect venomous reptiles or reptiles of concern that are held in captivity to determine whether they are safely and properly penned. If they are not safely and properly penned, the situation must be corrected within 30 days or the violator risks license or permit revocation.

The Florida statutes prohibits keeping, possessing, importing into the state, selling, bartering, trading, or breeding the following species except for educational, research, eradication, or control purposes:

- Burmese or Indian python (*Python molurus*),
- Reticulated python (*Python reticulatus*),
- Northern African python (*Python sebae*),
- Southern African python (*Python natalensis*),
- Amethystine or scrub python (*Morelia amethystinus*),
- Green Anaconda (*Eunectes murinus*),
- Nile monitor (*Varanus niloticus*),
- Green iguana (*Iguana iguana*),
- Tegu lizard (any species of the genera *Salvator* or *Tupinambis*), and
- Any other reptile FWC designates as a conditional or prohibited species.¹³

A person who holds a permit issued before July 1, 2010 to legally possess one of the species listed above may possess such reptile for the remainder of its life.¹⁴ If the reptile outlives the person, the reptile may be legally transferred to another entity holding a permit authorizing possession of the reptile for the remainder of its life.¹⁵

If FWC designates a species of reptile as a conditional or prohibited species after July 1, 2010, FWC may authorize the personal possession of that newly designated species by those licensed to possess it before the effective date of the species' designation.¹⁶

Currently, FWC does not list reptiles of concern, and former reptiles of concern have been listed as prohibited species since April 29, 2021.¹⁷ The conditional nonnative species list only contains one reptile, the red-eared slider (*Trachemys scripta elegans*).¹⁸

¹² Section 379.372(1), F.S.

¹³ Section 379.372(2), F.S.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ FWC, *Reptiles of Concern*, <https://myfwc.com/license/captive-wildlife/reptiles-of-concern/> (last visited Mar. 9, 2023).

¹⁸ FWC, *Conditional Nonnative Species List*, <https://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/nonnatives/conditional-species-list/> (last visited Mar. 9, 2023).

Venomous Reptile Permit

The venomous reptile permit issued by FWC authorizes personal possession and exhibition of the venomous reptile family for which the permittee is approved.¹⁹ The permit costs \$100. To qualify for a venomous reptile permit, an applicant must meet certain experience requirements, must be at least 18 years old, and must not have been convicted of:

- A violation of captive wildlife regulations;
- A violation involving the illegal commercialization of wildlife;
- A violation involving cruelty to animals; or
- A violation involving importation of animals within three years of the date of application.

Applicants must also demonstrate no less than one year of substantial practical experience in the care, feeding, handling, and husbandry of the species or other species within the same biological family that are similar in characteristics and care to the species for which the permit is sought. Applicants must also provide two references from individuals with firsthand knowledge of their experience. The individuals must be licensed by FWC for venomous reptiles of the same family for which the applicant is seeking authorization or must be a representative of a professional organization or governmental institution which deals directly with venomous reptiles.

Additional permits are required for the importation of nonnative venomous reptiles and the sale of all venomous reptiles.²⁰

Nonnative and Captive Wildlife Penalties

Level One Violations

A person commits a Level One violation if he or she violates any of the following provisions:

- FWC rules or orders requiring free permits or other authorizations to possess captive wildlife;
- FWC rules or orders relating to the filing of reports or other documents required of persons who are licensed to possess captive wildlife; or
- FWC rules or orders requiring permits to possess captive wildlife for which a fee is charged, when the person being charged was issued the permit and it expired less than 1 year prior to the violation.²¹

Any person cited for a Level One violation commits a noncriminal infraction and shall be cited to appear before county court. The violator will be fined \$50 if he or she has not previously been found guilty of a Level One violation and \$250 if he or she has previously been found guilty of a Level One violation.²²

Level Two Violations

A person commits a Level Two violation if he or she violates any of the following provisions:

¹⁹ FWC, *Venomous Reptile Fact Sheet*, 1 (2023) (On file with the Senate Committee on Environment and Natural Resources).

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ Section 379.4015(1), F.S.

²² *Id.*

- Unless otherwise stated under Level One violations, FWC rules or orders that require a person to pay a fee to obtain a permit to possess captive wildlife or that require the maintenance of records relating to captive wildlife;
- FWC rules or orders relating to captive wildlife not specified under Level One or Level Three violations;
- FWC rules or orders that require housing of wildlife in a safe manner when a violation results in an escape of wildlife other than Class I wildlife;²³
- FWC rules or orders relating to either conditional species or prohibited species;
- Section 379.372, F.S., relating to capturing, keeping, possessing, transporting, or exhibiting venomous reptiles, reptiles of concern, conditional reptiles, or prohibited reptiles;
- Section 379.373, F.S., relating to requiring a license or permit to capture, keep, possess, or exhibit venomous reptiles or reptiles of concern;
- Section 379.374, F.S., relating to bonding requirements for public exhibits of venomous reptiles;
- Section 379.305, F.S., relating to FWC rules and regulations preventing the escape of venomous reptiles or reptiles of concern;
- Section 379.304, or 379.3761, F.S., relating to the exhibition or sale of wildlife; or
- Section 379.3762, F.S., relating to personal possession of wildlife.²⁴

²³ Class I wildlife is a defined list of species that present a real or potential threat to human safety. Possession of Class I wildlife requires a license and species may not be possessed as a personal pet. There are substantial experience, cage, and proof of commercial activity requirements that must be met before a license to possess Class I wildlife will be issued. FWC, *Class I Wildlife*, <https://myfwc.com/license/captive-wildlife/class-i/> (last visited Mar. 9, 2023).

²⁴ Section 379.4015(2), F.S.

Level Two Violation	Degree of Offense	Fine or Incarceration	License Restrictions
Has not been convicted of a Level Two (or higher) violation within the past three years	2 nd Degree Misdemeanor	Max: \$500 or Max: 60 days	None
Convicted of a Level Two violation within three years of a previous conviction of a Level Two (or higher) violation	1 st Degree Misdemeanor	Mandatory Min: \$250; Max: \$1,000 Max: one year	None
Convicted of a Level Two (or higher) violation within five years of any two previous convictions of Level Two (or higher) violations	1 st Degree Misdemeanor	Mandatory Min: \$500; Max: \$1,000 Max: one year	Suspension of license for one year
Convicted of a Level Two violation within ten years of any three previous convictions of Level Two (or higher) violations	1 st Degree Misdemeanor	Mandatory Min: \$750; Max: \$1,000 Max: one year	Suspension of license for three years

In addition to the above penalties, a person who commits a Level Two violation that is a violation of s. 379.372, F.S., relating to capturing, keeping, possessing, transporting, or exhibiting venomous reptiles, reptiles of concern, conditional reptiles, or prohibited reptiles, or rules or orders relating to wild animals identified as conditional or prohibited shall receive a minimum mandatory fine of \$100 and immediately surrender the wildlife for which the violation was issued unless the person lawfully obtains a permit for possession.²⁵

Level Three Violations

A person commits a Level Three violation if he or she violates any of the following provisions:

- FWC rules or orders that require housing of wildlife in a safe manner when a violation results in an escape of Class I wildlife;
- FWC rules or orders related to captive wildlife when the violation results in serious bodily injury to another person by captive wildlife consisting of substantial risk of death, serious personal disfigurement, or protracted loss or impairment of the function of any bodily member or organ;
- FWC rules or orders relating to the use of gasoline or other chemical or gaseous substances on wildlife;

²⁵ *Id.*

- FWC rules or orders prohibiting the release of wildlife for which only conditional possession is allowed;
- FWC rules or orders prohibiting knowingly entering false information on an application for a license or permit to possess wildlife in captivity;
- FWC rules or orders relating to the illegal importation and possession of nonnative marine plants and animals;
- FWC rules or orders relating to the importation, possession, or release of fish and wildlife for which possession is prohibited;
- Section 379.231, F.S., relating to illegal importation or release of nonnative wildlife; or
- Section 379.305, F.S., relating to release or escape of nonnative venomous reptiles or reptiles of concern.²⁶

Level Three Violation	Degree of Offense	Fine or Incarceration	License Restrictions
Has not been convicted of a Level Three (or higher) violation within the past 10 years	1 st Degree Misdemeanor	Max: \$1,000 Max: one year	None
Convicted of a Level Three violation within ten years of a previous conviction of a Level Three (or higher) violation	1 st Degree Misdemeanor	Mandatory Min: \$750; Max: \$1,000 Max: one year	Permanent revocation of license or permit

Level Four Violations

A person commits a Level Four violation if he or she violates any Level Three provision after the permanent revocation of a license or permit.²⁷ A Level Four violation is a third degree felony, punishable by a fine of no more than \$5,000 or no more than a 5-year imprisonment.

Civil Penalties

In addition to other applicable penalties, FWC may impose a civil penalty of not more than \$5,000 for each animal, unless otherwise authorized.²⁸ For all related violations attributable to each specific violator, the total civil penalty may not exceed \$10,000 for each assessment for each animal. In determining the amount of the civil penalty, FWC may consider:

- A violator’s history of noncompliance for any previous violation of chapter 379, F.S., relating to FWC, or FWC rules or orders;
- The direct economic benefit gained by the violator from the violation; and
- The costs incurred by FWC related to the escape, recovery, and care of the wildlife for which the violation was issued.

²⁶ Section 379.4015(3), F.S.

²⁷ Section 379.4015(4), F.S.

²⁸ Section 379.4015(6), F.S.

The civil penalty assessed for a violation may not exceed \$5,000 for each animal unless:

- The violator has a history of noncompliance;
- The economic benefit of the violation exceeds \$5,000; or
- The costs incurred by FWC related to the escape, recovery, and care of the wildlife for which the violation was issued exceeds \$5,000.²⁹

III. Effect of Proposed Changes:

Section 1 amends s. 379.305, F.S., to revise the Level Three violation to penalize a person who knowingly releases any nonnative reptile of concern or who through gross negligence allows any nonnative reptile of concern to escape, making it a Level Four violation for the same actions involving any venomous reptile. The bill would not require the Level Three violation to include release to the wild.

The bill adds that a person who knowingly purchases, sells, attempts to sell, offers to sell, conspires to sell, barter, exchanges, trades, or imports for sale or use, any venomous reptile species without having first obtained a special permit or license from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) commits a Level Four violation.

Section 2 amends s. 379.4015, F.S., to provide that a person commits a Level Two violation if he or she violates FWC rules or orders relating to captive wildlife not specified as a Level Four violation. The bill adds that a person commits a Level Two violation if he or she violates FWC rules or orders that require housing wildlife in a safe manner when violation results in an escape of wildlife other than venomous reptiles.

The bill adds that a person commits a Level Three violation if he or she violates FWC rules or orders that require housing wildlife in a safe manner when a violation results in an escape of venomous reptiles.

The bill provides that a person commits a Level Three violation if he or she violates s. 379.305, F.S., only relating to release or escape of nonnative reptiles of concern, removing venomous reptiles to conform to Section 1 of the bill.

The bill adds that a person commits a Level Four violation if he or she violates s. 379.305(3), F.S., relating to release or escape of venomous reptiles, and s. 379.305(4), F.S., relating to purchase, sale, attempt to sell, offer for sale, conspiracy to sell, barter, exchange, trade, or import for sale or use of any species of venomous reptile.

Section 3 provides an effective date of July 1, 2023.

IV. Constitutional Issues:

A. Municipality/County Mandates Restrictions:

None.

²⁹ *Id.*

B. Public Records/Open Meetings Issues:

None.

C. Trust Funds Restrictions:

None.

D. State Tax or Fee Increases:

None.

E. Other Constitutional Issues:

None.

V. Fiscal Impact Statement:**A. Tax/Fee Issues:**

None.

B. Private Sector Impact:

None.

C. Government Sector Impact:

None.

VI. Technical Deficiencies:

None.

VII. Related Issues:

None.

VIII. Statutes Affected:

This bill substantially amends sections 379.305 and 379.4015 of the Florida Statutes.

IX. Additional Information:**A. Committee Substitute – Statement of Changes:**

(Summarizing differences between the Committee Substitute and the prior version of the bill.)

None.

B. Amendments:

None.

This Senate Bill Analysis does not reflect the intent or official position of the bill's introducer or the Florida Senate.
